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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the benefits of indigenous mother tongue immersion programs, examining the Total Physical Response approach to immersion for beginning learners and focusing on the development of Maori and Hawaiian mother tongue language immersion programs. The paper discusses the importance of immersing students in a language-risk environment, noting that an effective natural approach to immersion is based on four principles: comprehension precedes production, students learn new language in stages, the objective of language learning is to be able to carry out a conversation in that language, and classroom activities need to lessen student anxiety. It cautions that it is very important to introduce English early on in bilingual programs in the United States and that the idea of never speaking English can be overdone. It also questions delaying English instruction for a considerable period, suggesting that bilingual programs should be fully bilingual with a strong English language arts program. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

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# Native Language Immersion

Jon Reyhner

Immersion teaching methods have shown a marked improvement over earlier language teaching approaches, such as the grammar translation audiolingual methods of the 1960s. The central characteristic of immersion is the teaching of language, content, and culture in combination without the use of the child's first language. Students are taught a second language they initially don't understand through the use of a variety of context clues provided by the teacher. Since immersion methods were first used in the 1960s to teach French to English speaking students in Quebec, they have become increasingly popular. Test scores show that immersion students can learn the same academic content as students in English-Only classrooms along with a second language without losing fluency in English (de Courcy, 2002; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Genesee et al., 1985; Genesee, 1987). Immersion students as they proceed together through the grades also develop a strong sense of camaraderie and often form a "values community" that reflects the positive aspects of the language and culture that they are learning.

Immersion language teachers provide ideally at least half-day (partial) immersion for students in the language they are targeted to learn and often students receive full-day (total) immersion. The less students are likely to be exposed to a new language they are learning outside of school, the more they need to experience it in school. Children will learn to speak a high prestige language that is omnipresent in their community and the media, such as English, even if it receives no support in the school, however they will need instruction to use it for academic tasks.

## Total Physical Response

A popular approach to immersion for beginning language learners is TPR or Total Physical Response. The psychologist James J. Asher (2000) popularized TPR in the 1970s. TPR begins with "silent period" where learners respond physically to simple requests by the teacher who uses gestures to help get across to the students what the teacher wants them to do. The acting out of the requested behaviors helps students remember the meaning of the new phrases they are hearing. While students initially respond silently to their teacher's requests, after just a few lessons they are asking other students to perform actions, including recombining vocabulary that the teacher has been using and making requests that they have never heard before.

Asher (2000) describes step-by-step how to use TPR to help students learn another language without stress and includes a sequence of 53 sample lessons beginning with simple requests like "stand up," walk," "jump," and so forth and ending with a skit involving students acting out a trip to the supermarket as they are given verbal instructions. Richard Littlebear (1992) found TPR an effective way to teach his Northern Cheyenne language, and Preston Thompson (2003) has also found it very effective in teaching his Ho Chunk language.

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One of the problems with TPR is getting past asking students to respond to simple "commands" found in Asher's book *Learning Another Language Through Actions*. To help teachers with more advanced instruction, Ray and Seely (1997) have developed what they call TPR Storytelling (TPR-S) that involves students acting out stories with written scripts. Cantoni (1999, p. 54) has written about using TPR-S to teach American Indian languages. TPR-S lessons "utilize the vocabulary taught in the earlier [TPR] stage by incorporating it into stories that the learners hear, watch, act out, retell, revise, read, write, and rewrite." Driskill (this volume) discusses using the Theatre of the Oppressed to promote Indigenous language learning.

Math and science are typical content subjects taught through immersion in the primary grades as they are best taught through the use of manipulatives and hands-on activities. In higher grades there is often less time spent in second language immersion and the subject taught is often tribal history and government because of the difficulty of obtaining appropriate curriculum for other subjects.

Indigenous mother tongue immersion and foreign or second language immersion differ in terms of the commitment to culturally transforming the student. Mother tongue immersion seeks to transmit the children's Indigenous culture while foreign language immersion seeks to create an understanding and appreciation of the culture associated with the new language.

**Maori and Hawaiian immersion programs**

The Maori and Hawaiian mother-tongue language immersion programs are well developed. The Maori began with preschools, their "Language Nests" or *Kohanga Reo*, in 1982 taught by Maori speaking elders. The main features of the *Kohanga Reo* are that Maori is the sole language to be spoken and heard, no smoking is allowed in the environs, they are to be kept scrupulously clean in the interest of the health, and decisions are the prerogative of the parents who have children in the *Kohanga Reo* along with the care-givers (Te Köhanga Reo, 2003).

Under pressure from parents who wanted their children's Maori education continued in the public schools, the New Zealand government established Maori immersion elementary and secondary schools. Maori Language Commissioner Timoti Karetu was impressed by a visit to Navajo Community College, now Diné College, in 1976 and subsequently helped move his university to offer Maori immersion teacher training.

Learning, from the Maori example, the Hawaiian language immersion program began with family-based preschools in 1983 and in the public schools in 1987 after Hawai'i's English-Only law for schools was changed. A parent described to me his involvement in his child's *Punano Leo*, "This is a way of life ...you have to take it home." He described how the Hawaiian immersion brings back the moral values of the culture and how the culture mends families. The English translation of the *Punana Leo* mission statement reads:

> The Pünana Leo Movement grew out of a dream that there be reestablished throughout Hawai'i the mana of a living Hawaiian language from the depth of our origins. The Pünana Leo initiates, provides for and nurtures various Hawaiian Language environments, and we find our strength in our spirituality, love of our language, love of our people, love of our land, and love of knowledge. (Aha Pünana Leo, 2003)

In 2003 there were twelve preschools and 23 public schools with Hawaiian immersion classes. The first immersion students graduated from high school in 1999, and the University of Hawai'i at Hilo has a Hawaiian immersion teacher-training program to staff new immersion schools (William Wilson, personal communication, July 31, 2003). An excellent videotape titled *E Ola Ka 'Olelo Hawai'i* (1997) is available in Hawaiian with English subtitles that describes the renaissance of the Hawaiian language. It tells the story of over a century of decline for the Hawaiian language and the revival of its use in the past two decades. Through interviews, archival footage, and visits to Hawaiian language immersion classrooms, it makes a powerful statement about the value of the Hawaiian language and culture for Native Hawaiians. It describes how Hawaiian language activists learned about Maori "language nest" immersion preschools, implemented them in Hawaii, and then expanded Hawaiian language immersion instruction into the public schools of Hawaii by getting state English-only laws changed. Indigenous mother tongue immersion is in its infancy in the mainland United States, relegated mainly to preschool and primary examples such as the Arapaho language immersion program on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming (Greymorning, 1997 & 1999).

Indigenous mother tongue immersion programs are voluntary and require parent involvement. In Hawai'i parents are required to help in the preschools eight hours per month and to take classes in Hawaiian so they can support the instruction given in the schools. A nonprofit corporation supports the preschools, provides post-secondary scholarships for the study of Hawaiian, and develops Hawaiian language curriculum and materials for use in the schools.

An example of a small experimental immersion school on the mainland is the Cut-Bank Language Immersion School that teaches the Blackfeet language in Montana. From his experiences, co-founder Darrell R. Kipp (2000) gives the following advice to people interested in revitalizing their languages:

- Rule 1: Never Ask Permission, Never Beg to Save the Language. Go ahead and get started, don't wait even five minutes. Don't wait for a grant....
- Rule 2: Don't Debate the Issues
- Rule 3: Be Very Action-Oriented: Just Act
- Rule 4: Show, Don't Tell. Don't talk about what you will do. Do it and show it.

Some immersion teachers are learning the language they are teaching as a second language (see Hinton, this volume), and their speaking ability can be

criticized. One indigenous language teacher noted "I don't speak like my grandmother, but I speak the language of my grandmother." Another teacher commented that we need to "Get beyond the notion you can only be smart in English."

**The Natural Approach**

The best way to acquire a second language is the same way children acquire a first language: Immerse students in a second language rich environment rather than the traditional teaching-learning situation. As Judith Lindfors states, "What's good for the first-language learner is good for the second." A well worked out approach to immersion education is Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell's (1983) Natural Approach, which is based on four principles:

1. "Comprehension Precedes Production"
   - The teacher always uses the language he or she is teaching;
   - The lesson (what is talked about) is focused on a topic that the students are interested in; and
   - The teacher works continuously to help students understand using gestures, visuals, and real objects.
2. Students learn new languages in stages, beginning with a "silent period" where they just listen and then by starting to speak single words, than a few words, then phrases, and finally moving to sentences and complex discourse. Errors in grammar and pronunciation that do not interfere with understanding should not be corrected.
3. The objective of learning a language is to be able to carry out a conversation in that language. Lessons should center on an activity rather than a grammatical structure.
4. Classroom activities need to lesson student anxiety. They need to focus on topics of interest and relevancy to the students and "encourage them to express their ideas, opinions, desires, emotions, and feelings." The teacher needs to create a warm, friendly, welcoming classroom to insure language learning. (Adapted from Reyhner, 1992, pp. 75-76)

While the Natural Approach focuses on getting students to the point where they can carry on a conversation in the language they are learning, teachers can focus on topics of interest such as hands-on science lessons and develop students' academic as well as conversational language proficiency using immersion teaching methods.Whatever the method of language instruction, learning a language takes time. Leanne Hinton (1994) estimates it takes about 500 hours to achieve a basic conversational proficiency in a new language.

**Cautions**

It should be noted that while Jim Cummins, Stephen Krashen, and other prominent supporters of bilingual education strongly support teaching children their heritage languages, they also continue to emphasize the need to introduce

English early-on in bilingual programs in the United States. Cummins (2000) questions a "rigid" separation of languages in bilingual programs, "a near-exclusive emphasis" on the home language in the early grades, and the idea that literacy skills can transfer automatically from the home language to English (pp. 20-21). While immersion is a good teaching method, the idea that one should never speak English can be overdone. One cannot, for example, do an effective job of comparing and contrasting grammatical features of say Blackfeet and English in the language that students are just learning, and such an explanation might be very helpful for older students.

Cummins (2000) especially questions "delaying the instruction of English literacy for a considerable period" (p. 176). In regard to the well-known threshold and interdependency hypothesis he writes that "*Neither hypothesis says anything about the appropriate language to begin reading instruction within a bilingual program nor about when reading instruction in the majority language should be introduced*" (p. 176, emphasis in original). He writes,

> *I believe, and have strongly argued, that a bilingual program should be fully bilingual with a strong English language arts (reading and writing) program together with a strong L1* [first language]*...language arts program* (pp. 24-25, emphasis in original).

Cummins sees a special problem with delaying the introduction of English in Indigenous language programs because of the current lack of written literaturefor older students in many Indigenous languages.

**Note:** Information in this article is partly from a conference and workshop on Advancing Immersion Education sponsored by the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in July 1998. For more information on immersion go to the Teaching Indigenous Languages web site at http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/TIL.html

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